

“We Are Your Sons, Your Daughters”

Several months ago, I asked the men and women whose articles appear in this special issue of *Public Health Reports* to share with us their points of view on the battle we have been waging against AIDS and on the problems and prospects for progress that they see in their particular areas.

I was able to review many of the papers as they came in, and I could not help but be impressed by the knowledge and commitment reflected in each. I thank the authors for their contributions. It is obvious to me that this edition of *Public Health Reports*, which we have devoted exclusively to AIDS and have released to coincide with the Second AIDS Prevention and Control Conference, will do much to provide health professionals and the public with a better understanding of this insidious killer and its impact on our society.

Less than 7 years have elapsed since the first cases of AIDS appeared in this country. Since then, however, we have recorded more than 55,000 cases and more than half that many deaths. We estimate that over 1 million people in this country may be infected with the AIDS virus.

In the absence of a vaccine that would protect people against AIDS and a drug or combination of therapies that would cure it, we have turned, and rightly so, to education—to replacing myths and fears with the facts about AIDS and its transmission. The facts may be stated succinctly: AIDS is a 100 percent preventable disease; no one not already infected with the virus needs to become infected.

In his article, “The American Medical Association and the War on AIDS” (see page 282) AMA President William J. Hotchkiss, MD, takes note of the important role that physicians must play in the education process and of the responsibility that the AMA has accepted for supporting physicians in that role. I applaud the AMA for its concern and for the many steps it already has taken to increase AIDS awareness among health professionals and, through them, the general public. In my view, the practicing physician is, or should be, the single most knowledgeable and accessible source of information on AIDS in any community. I see four

areas in which the physician is better equipped than anyone else to contribute:

- prescribing and overseeing the care of persons with HIV infection, ARC, and AIDS; implicit in this role is patient counseling aimed at preventing the spread of the virus to others;
- counseling patients (non-AIDS) and all who inquire about the ways in which the AIDS virus is transmitted, which is to say on behaviors that must be avoided or changed;
- conversely, dispelling groundless myths and community fears by explaining—and, often, by re-explaining—how the AIDS virus is *not* transmitted, which is to say by casual contact; and, finally,
- showing, by word and deed, the same kind of compassion for the AIDS-infected person that we have for people with other serious illnesses; most often, in my experience, compassion for the AIDS patient springs naturally from an understanding of the true facts about this virus and its transmission.

Earlier this year, in one of the AIDS briefings that my staff and I have been holding for writers, we heard from two young people who have become infected—Tema Luft, who has ARC, and Bill Travis, who has AIDS. In his statement to the reporters, Bill put the disease he has and the hysteria it often spawns in proper perspective, with an uplifting twist that I shall not forget.

“The only way we can fight fear,” he said, “is with the facts. You do not have to be afraid of us. We are your sons and daughters, your children, your parents, your uncles, your next-door neighbors. I think that persons with AIDS present an opportunity to the American public for a tremendous amount of personal education and growth”

If there is a better way of thinking about this disease we call AIDS, I have yet to hear it expressed. May we all have the courage and, yes, the good fortune to face squarely the many problems that AIDS presents, to overcome them one by one, and to become better human beings in the process.

Robert E. Windom, MD
Assistant Secretary for Health

The Ambassador of Health
and the
Assistant Secretary for Health

Urge you to hold out a
helping hand to people with AIDS

"... that's what friends are for."



Dionne Warwick

Robert E. Windom, M.D.



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